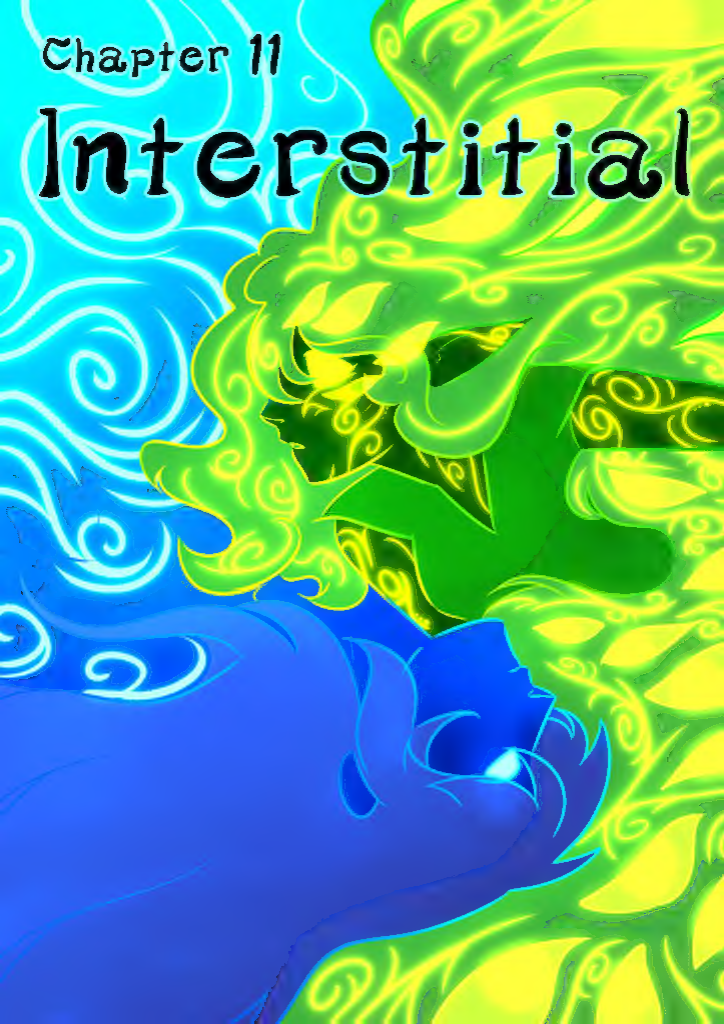

Chapter 11
Interstitial

So it's a monastery?
On Helm, yes. Quite isolated.
Neat.
Never been to another continent before.
Well, don't get too excited.
Helm is mostly sand and cliffs.
There are some very interesting Ancient ruins in the Silent Lands, though.
Oooh, ruins. Sign me up.
What about all the people?
Helm is very sparsely populated. There are only two cities, both coastal.
Not many people want to live on an exposed spar of freezing rock.
Open skies and nobody around?
This place is sounding better all the time.
Hey Kendal, did Vash know anyone on Helm?
I don't...
THUD

KENDAL!
What's going on? What happened?!
...don't know. My head...
Is he injured?
I- I don't think so.
Maybe one of those chimeras was venomous.
Could something have happened to Vash? With your connection-
When's the last time you slept?
I don't sleep.
...Kendal, have you not been sleeping at ALL?
Why would I need to sleep?
Well, that'd do it.
By my count, you've existed for a sef and a half now. You haven't slept at ALL in that time?
Vash didn't sleep.
Vash didn't need his body to stay alive.
We're making camp. Now.

I shouldn't be doing this.
We don't have time to waste. There has to be another way.
Sorry, there's no substitute for sleep.
Trust me.
Even I need to sleep every couple days or I get all fuzzy.
You're always fuzzy.
I'm gonna let that one slide because you're very tired.
I'm sorry. I-
Calm down.
I get it.
You're not used to feeling weak.
But pretending you're strong when you're not is a good way to get yourself hurt.
Okay! We're all set up!

A good night's sleep is very important. It keeps your mind sharp and your body healthy.
When you're prepping for a solo expedition into a hazardous, unmapped wasteland, it's vital to be in absolute top form.
That's why I always make sure to pack the most comfortable bedding I own.
I think you'll find it EXTREMELY relaxing.
FLUMP
I don't think it's working.
That's because you're not DOING it right!
You're not even under the blanket! You're still wearing your BOOTS!
This feels very complicated. You really do this every night?
Th- it's NOT complicated! It's the most natural thing in the world!
Well, sounds like they're having fun.

All right, you've got things handled here.
I'll be back later.
Wait, where are you going?
Your heavy hitter's gonna be out of commission for a few hours.
I'm gonna scout around and make sure nothing's planning on making trouble for us before he's back on his feet.
Oh - I mean, that's nice, but I don't think you need to worry.
Erin and I can take care of ourselves.
Oh, I know. You're both very impressive.
CRICK
But that doesn't mean you don't have weaknesses.
Mages never remember that.
You're too reliant on a power that isn't yours.

Shut your eyes.
Keep them closed.
Steady your breathing.
Let your thoughts go quiet.
AAGH!
AH! WHAT!
It- it felt like I was falling!
YES that happens sometimes it is PERFECTLY SAFE AND FINE
Okay. He's resting.
We'll see if he figures out actual sleeping.

Is he all right?
Just worried, I think.
Vulnerability doesn't really come naturally to him, does it?
Mm. Not physically, anyway.
...He knows we'll keep him safe, right?
Psh. Of course.
We're not the problem here.
He's been holding himself to a divine standard because it's all he has to compare himself to.
He's just shaken up because he finally found his physical limits.
...Heh. Yeah.
It's been really nonstop. I'm glad he's finally getting a break, even if he's not happy about it.
Well, maybe this'll be the day he finally learns to care about his own well-being and loses the suicidal recklessness.

Stay quiet.
She can't know you're here.
Just listen.
So, I don't think I've ever really asked -
Why MY city?

If you'd taken Zuurith, half the cities on the continent would've hailed you as a hero.
I mean, if you didn't kill them first.
Hm. True.
But Zuurith is inconveniently located.
You, on the other hand, were built in a crater.
It was a nice crater. Very defensible.
Clearly not defensible enough.
SKCHK
...I'm sorry, that was rude of me.
To you, it was a natural defensive wall.
But to me, it was a wound on Stone's skin.
A scrape like that is trivial to close.
You... you HEALED it?
You CAN'T heal a dead primordial. It's impossible.
And yet, here we are.
Right now, we sit in the ruins of Stone's third heart.
It's certainly seen better days, but it still remembers the bygone days when it used to beat.
All dead things were once alive. Sometimes all they need is a reminder.
All mages revive tiny fragments of the primordials to do their magic.
Tiny fragments suit tiny mages with tiny minds.
But I've seen the bigger picture.

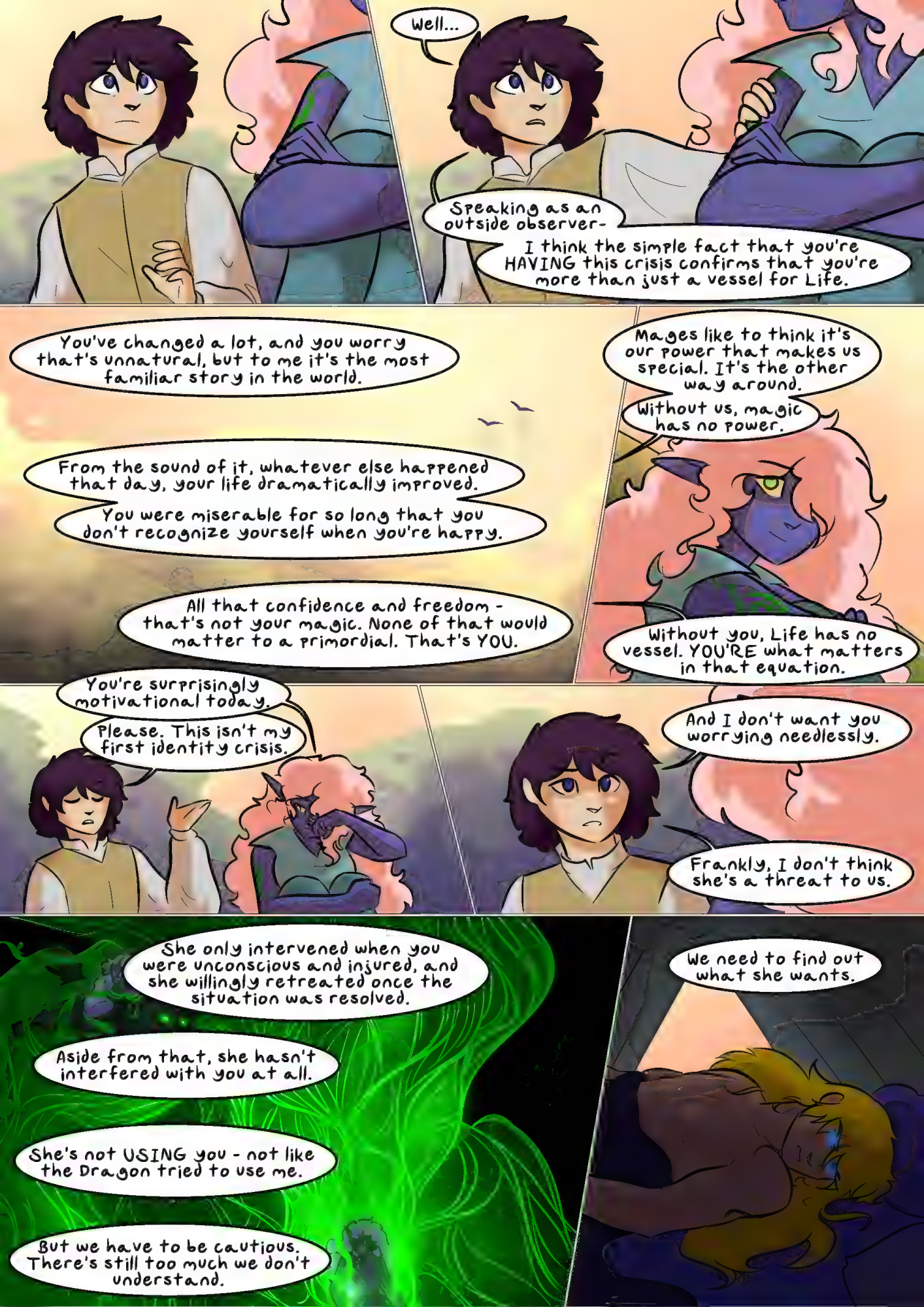
I don't wanna end.
Of course not!
You haven't seen it!
It's not your fault, really.
I don't think ANYONE else has seen it.
And when I did, wow!
It REALLY did a number on me.
I think I had a name, once.
But I didn't have any room left for it.
When I touched her mind...
Everything else just got so small.

Who-?
And after that, how could I think about anything else?
She never stopped to consider what it would feel like.
She thought she'd be too dead to care.
Trapped, frozen, fused with her dead comrades.
Ripped back to consciousness, her body helplessly shattered.
She suffered in death, but what followed was worse.
Can you imagine?
Oh, oops. Actually, maybe you CAN imagine.
Sorry.
But that means you get it, right?
You see why I have to fix this.
I MIGHT "get it" if you told me what we were TALKING about!
Wait... do you mean Lifa? The tr-murd-r?
All in one? She's "trapped" in the Flesh? ...With the others?
She has a name, you know.
But she's dead. Time will heal.
She WAS.
Don't you see?
I woke her up.

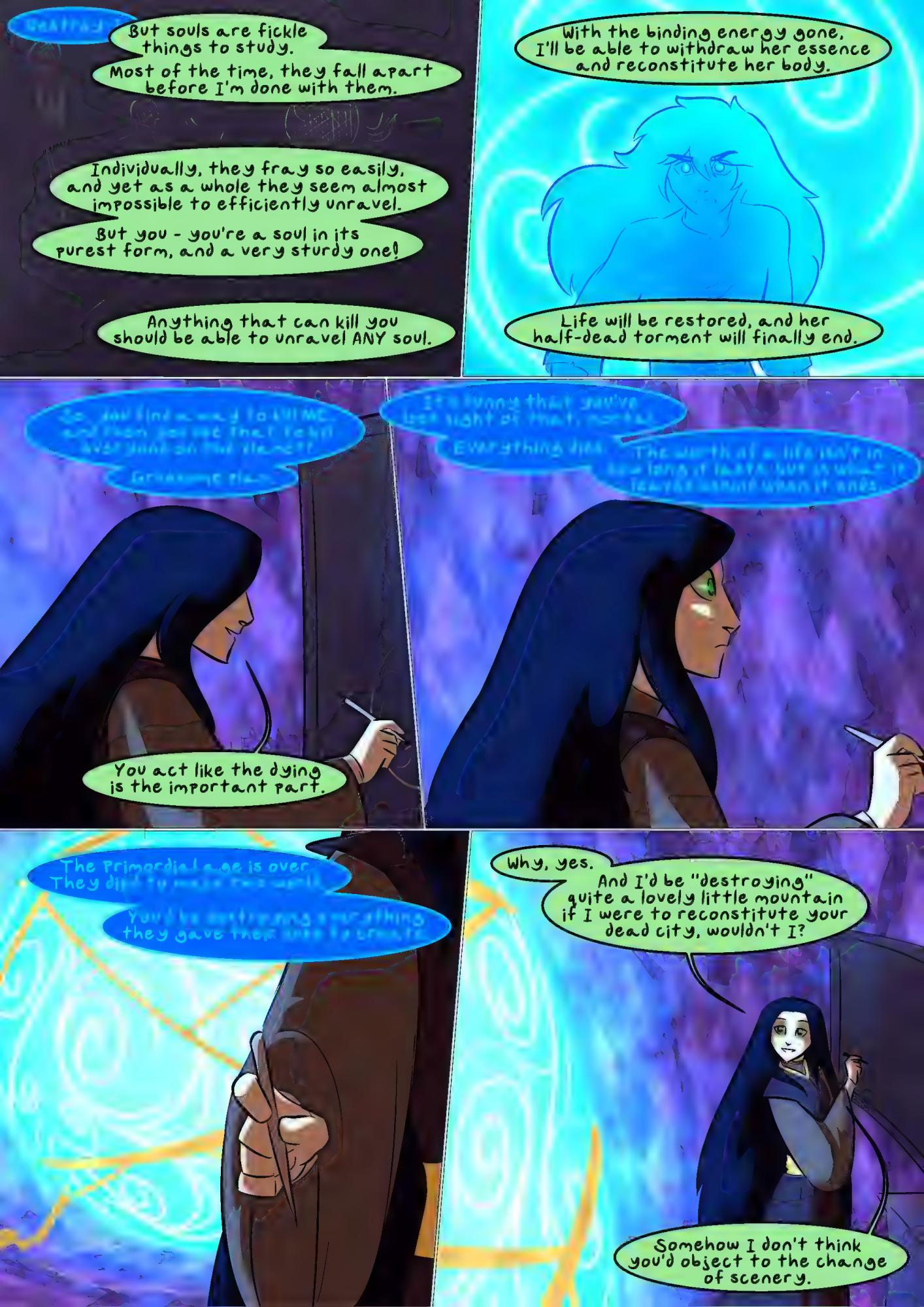
We have to tell him. Sooner rather than later.
Falst needs to know what he's getting into if he's going to keep traveling with us.
Of course.
I can explain the situation with the Dragon once he gets back.
But I'm not sure how to explain YOUR magic.
What?
I mean - what's to explain?
"Thought I had the chimeric plague, didn't"?
...You know there's more to it than that.
Does there have to be?
I'm self-taught. I was alone for a long time. Of course my magic is a little weird.
You grew a plant colossus WHILE UNCONSCIOUS.
And it kept us safe! I didn't hurt anyone!
That's not the point.
It is to me!
Isn't it enough that it's helping us? Do I HAVE to understand it?
For the first time in my life, my power is under control!
That's all I wanted!
The Void Dragon called you "Life's Vessel".
Are you sure you're the one in control?

Life's...?
It explains why he's so scared of you. You're not just a mage.
You're like... well, me and him.
But... Life is dead. They all are.
There's a lot we don't know about the Primordials.
She died. That doesn't mean she stayed dead.
I had my doubts, and I don't deal in speculation.
But after what I saw... what I HEARD, I think he's right about you
I wouldn't be saying this if I weren't sure.
So I'll ask again- are you sure you're in control?
I've been hearing her voice.
Wh- when? For how long?
It started after I met Kendal.
I had to save him, and I... I channeled too much.
I felt my own magic tear me apart. I was so sure I was going to die.
But it passed, and I was still there.
At least, I thought I was.

What did she-?
Do you know, my eyes used to be gray?
I think they changed that night.
I didn't notice for days.
And when I did, I- I didn't want to care.
I was free. That's all that mattered.
And it's... it's been so EASY.
My magic used to fight me constantly.
Like it was trying to break out THROUGH me.
But since that night...
...it's been as natural as moving my hand.
Everything's changed.
I'm safe, happy - I'm seeing the world for the first time.
It's like a dream.
Or...
...or like I'm a different person.
What if I'm not the one who woke up?


Well...
Speaking as an outside observer-
I think the simple fact that you're HAVING this crisis confirms that you're more than just a vessel for Life.
You've changed a lot, and you worry that's unnatural, but to me it's the most familiar story in the world.
From the sound of it, whatever else happened that day, your life dramatically improved.
You were miserable for so long that you don't recognize yourself when you're happy.
All that confidence and freedom - that's not your magic. None of that would matter to a primordial. That's YOU.
Mages like to think it's our power that makes us special. It's the other way around.
Without us, magic has no power.
Without you, Life has no vessel. YOU'RE what matters in that equation.
You're surprisingly motivational today.
Please. This isn't my first identity crisis.
And I don't want you worrying needlessly.
Frankly, I don't think she's a threat to us.
She only intervened when you were unconscious and injured, and she willingly retreated once the situation was resolved.
Aside from that, she hasn't interfered with you at all.
She's not USING you - not like the Dragon tried to use me.
But we have to be cautious. There's still too much we don't understand.
We need to find out what she wants.

Reawakening a dead primordial all by yourself?
That's impressive accomplishment for such a small mortal.
I wish I could take full credit, but it wasn't intentional.
When I discovered her Great Rune, I invoked the entirety of her being for the first time since her death.
I suppose it wasn't too surprising she'd wake up from the shock.
But reawakening her mind didn't save her body. She was too fragmented, bound up in so many things.
And that's where you come in!
...How?
Oh, come on.
Don't you know why a water mage can't simply pull someone's blood out?
Or a stone mage can't powderize bone with a thought? It's just stone to them!
A structural component its host from elemental manipulation.
Exactly!
The problem is the soul!
Soul energy is omnipresent and completely nonmalleable. Even I can't control it directly.
It binds Life to the fragmentary corpses of her compatriots in billions of tiny amalgams, so tightly woven that not even my magic can withdraw her essence from their forms.
I have to resort to these crude soulcrystal tools just to interact with its energy!
But if I can destroy that binding energy, I can free her.


But souls are fickle things to study.
Most of the time, they fall apart before I'm done with them.
Individually, they fray so easily, and yet as a whole they seem almost impossible to efficiently unravel.
But you - you're a soul in its purest form, and a very sturdy one!
Anything that can kill you should be able to unravel ANY soul.
With the binding energy gone, I'll be able to withdraw her essence and reconstitute her body.
Life will be restored, and her half-dead torment will finally end.
You act like the dying is the important part.
Why, yes.
And I'd be "destroying" quite a lovely little mountain if I were to reconstitute your dead city, wouldn't I?
Somehow I don't think you'd object to the change of scenery.

I fought to stop her!
She sacrificed herself to create this world!
Do you REALLY think this is what she'd want?
Of course.
I've touched her mind.
But more importantly, I know what YOU want.
You hope I'll change my mind at the first hint of introspection.
Even a being as vast as you can't seem to understand the greater good.
You assign so much value to such unpleasant amalgams.
You realize EVERY ONE of those amalgams, right?
Even if you get your way, you'll die!
You said so yourself.
What matters is what I leave behind.
I've had centuries to think this through. Did you really think that didn't occur to me?
My legacy will be grander than anything this world could produce.
Not that "legacy" really matters here.
It used to, I think.
There was a time when glory was all my mind had room for.
But that's the beauty of being part of something bigger than myself!
All those self-centered concerns just boiled away.
Now it's just me and the destiny I was made to fulfill.

And you get to be a part of it!
Forgive me if I don't share your enthusiasm.
Oh, I'd be very surprised if you did!
Now, let's try another filament...
CRACK
?

Huh.
All right, pal.
Keep your distance and we'll have no problems.
Which is kind of weird.
I haven't needed to scare off anything bigger than a wolf.
Unless something beat me to it?

Stupid.
I'm looking for trouble.
Trying to fix anything but the real problem, right?
Find something to hit so you don't deal with what's really scaring you?
If I wanted to be alone, I should've stayed in the forest.
I can't keep avoiding them.
Oh.
Hello, trouble.

Well, that explains it!
Big and territorial. You've gotta be a dragon.
That's right, eyes on me! It's a good thing I pissed you off - they'd have blundered straight into you!
Did you scare everything else away?
Come on, over here!
Trust me, this isn't fun for me either.
But I can't have you in those woods!

Already mad?
We're just getting started!

UHAT
KHAAAAKH!!!
CRACK
BLOOD
SKRCH!
CRACK
All right then.
Let's try that again.

I GOT IT!
KABOOM
WOO!
SPLASH!
Sorry, had to step in!
There's an Ignan settlement just south of here I didn't want getting disintegrated.
And Burrower Wyrms are HARD to put down on land.
You okay back there?
...Hello?

Hellooo?
Huh.
Listen, I can't stay long!
If you need urgent medical attention, bloop once!
Well... okay!
Bye!
PLORP
Oh, hey!
Quick question!
Have you seen a human mage around here?
Pale, skinny, short dark hair?
Tattoos?
Okay then!
Have a nice night!

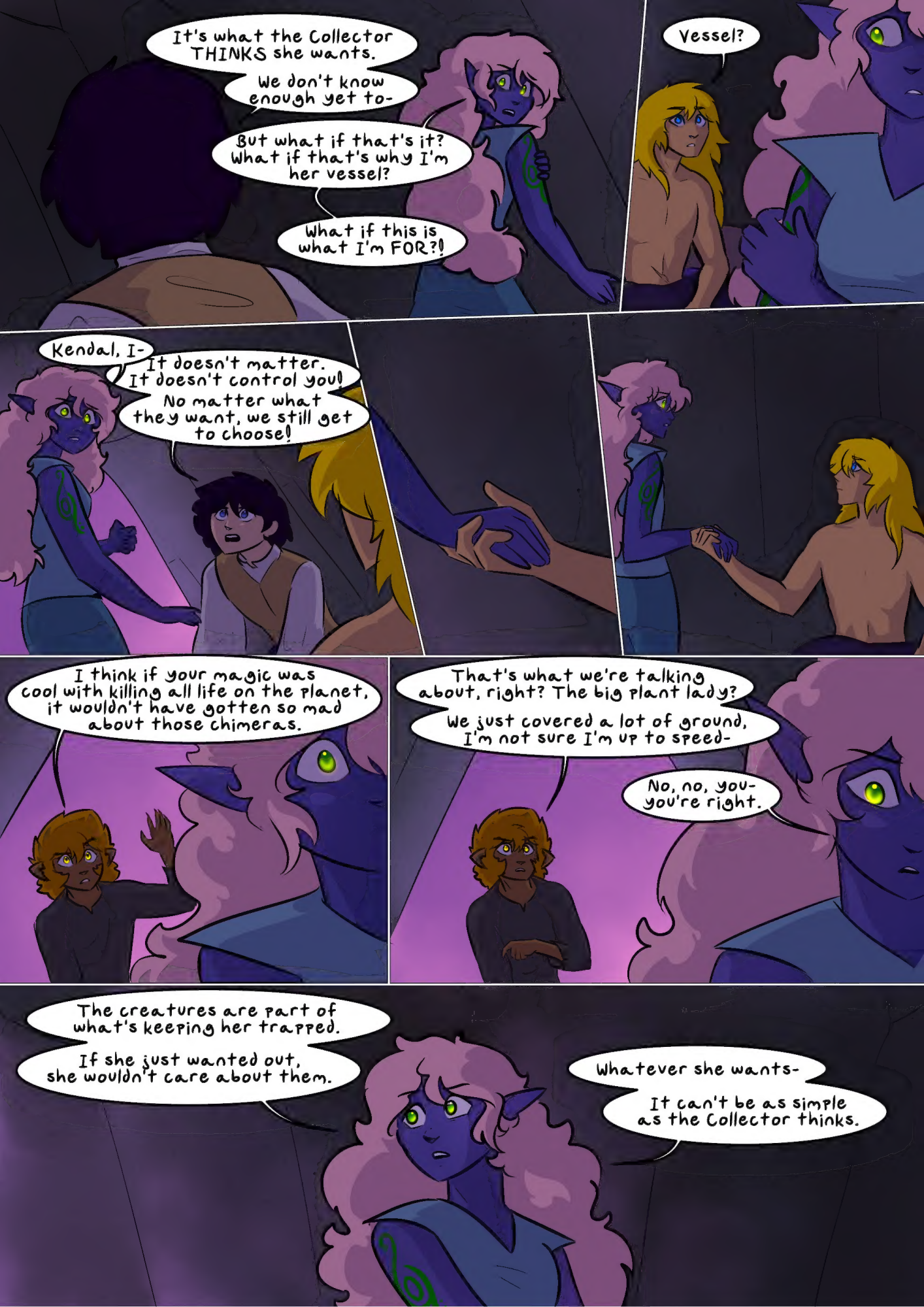
KHOOM
SNIF
I need a nap.

So...
I'm guessing your whole thing with Life is how you talked off that stray summon?
Well, of course.
The Primordials were beings vast beyond the scope of mortal comprehension.
Touch one of their minds, and no part of you remains unchanged.
And Life, the principle of transformation and survival -
I suppose it's only natural she'd grant me such a gift.
How thoughtful.
Don't suppose you know if it has any weaknesses?
...You're very inquisitive today.
I hope I haven't damaged your mind. I need you to last.
What a guy can't ask questions?
You seemed disinclined to for the last sef or so.
I'd assumed you'd simply resigned yourself.
Has something changed?
Uh oh.
Time to go.

There shouldn't be any degradation, but you're much more complex than the spirits I've kept before.
I suppose it's possible...
Go. Go!
Each severed filame
unweaves part of your
But it always rewea
if I don't damage the s
It CAN'T be damage.
Not yet, anyway.
Then what?
Wh- don't FIGHT me!
If she learns about you-
You HEARD what she wants!
Your soul is unique!
I'm ORDERING you-
GO!

How are you feeling?
GAH!
CRACK
Sit up too fast?
That's why I don't sleep indoors.
...Kendal?
Are you all right?
I saw the Collector.
And I know what she wants.

SHE discovered Life's truename?!
She's WORKING for Life? Life WANTS this?!
Your boss is a god?
Oh, was that one common knowledge?
You guys don't tell me stuff.
I know you're not exactly an emissary, but it's not unheard of for them to commune with their god in dreams.
It sounds like Vash took a risk to get you some very valuable information.
The Collector is formidable, but that grand plan of hers is highly unlikely to become a threat anytime soon.
She's been working on the problem for centuries and is still in the data-gathering phase.
We've got ample time to figure out a gameplan to deal with her.
If Life gets free, that destroys the world.
It... kills everything.
Is that really what she wants?


It's what the Collector THINKS she wants.
We don't know enough yet to-
But what if that's it? What if that's why I'm her vessel?
What if this is what I'm FOR?!
Vessel?
Kendal, I-
It doesn't matter. It doesn't control you!
No matter what they want, we still get to choose!
I think if your magic was cool with killing all life on the planet, it wouldn't have gotten so mad about those chimeras.
That's what we're talking about, right? The big plant lady?
We just covered a lot of ground, I'm not sure I'm up to speed-
No, no, you- you're right.
The creatures are part of what's keeping her trapped.
If she just wanted out, she wouldn't care about them.
Whatever she wants-
It can't be as simple as the Collector thinks.

Well, that's good.
I don't think I'm up for TWO apocalyptic primordial threats right now.
What's the second one?
I'll tell you later.
And at least you've found a way to commune with Vash!
I don't know if he'll let me do it again.
He pushed me away.
How can I save him if he won't let me help?
It sounds like he was trying to protect you.
Why?
This is the only reason I exist!
Ah.
Okay, I see what's happening here.
Listen, no matter WHAT kind of parent you have- you don't OWE them just because they made you.
Yeah.
Psh. No kidding.
A-anyway, you're all he's got, remember?
If he loses you, he's REALLY in trouble.
Let him be a little protective.

CR CK
...What is THAT?
KT
CRACK